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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that successful school-to-work transitional planning must be linked to good vocational assessment. A study of the type and extent of formal vocational assessments being conducted by educators within secondary schools in Wisconsin showed that 77 percent assessed occupational interests, 63 percent assessed vocational aptitudes, and 59 percent administered learning style preference surveys. A number of standardized tests were used for these assessments. The study also found that the Career Occupational Preference Survey (COPS) and the Career Ability Placement Survey (CAPS) are widely used by personnel who work with students with special needs. Educators who used these tests used the data gathered for developing individual education plans, placing students into programs, and formal transition planning. In order to make appropriate curricular and instructional modifications within vocational-technical programs, the use of alternative assessment approaches such as the "MAGIC" model is suggested. The five essential steps of this model are as follows: (1) Make a prediction; (2) Assess entry-level skills and learner outcomes; (3) Guide student acquisition of discrepant skills; (4) Instruct student on generalization strategies; and (5) Coordinate maintenance checks following program placement. Using such a curriculum-based assessment method can help educators to provide meaningful curriculum and instructional modifications for special needs students. These modifications can increase the chances for students with special needs to complete their courses of study and enter the world of work with the skills and motivation needed to be successful. (KC)

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BRIEF

Volume 6, Number 2

VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PRACTICES: WHAT WORKS

by Richard C. Lombard

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Successful school-to-work transition planning must be linked to good vocational assessment. The question is, what type of assessment provides the information needed to achieve these important outcomes? Formal psychometric approaches such as occupational interest inventories and vocational aptitude batteries are commonly used. But there are questions: Are these approaches appropriate for meeting the needs of students who are members of special populations and can they provide sufficient data to achieve the outcomes characterized in the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990? These questions were central to a statewide research study conducted in Wisconsin by Lombard, Larson, and Westphal (1993).

The researchers examined the type and extent of formal vocational assessments being conducted by educators within secondary schools in Wisconsin. They also investigated the degree to which school staff utilize assessment information to carry out activities associated with the Perkins Act of 1990. Consequently, they suggest the use of the MAGIC model as an alternative assessment approach for making curriculum or instructional modifications.

Vocational asessment instruments widely used

A survey of 70 secondary school programs that serve students who are members of special populations revealed that the majority of instructors in the study do administer formal vocational assessment instruments to students with special needs. Findings indicated that:

- 77% of the instructors assessed occupational interests,
- 63% assessed vocational aptitudes, and
- 59% administered learning style preference surveys.

Table 1 contains the top three instruments most frequently used to assess students' interests, aptitudes, and learning styles.

Table 1

Vocational Assessment Instruments Most Frequently Used

Assessment	Instruments Used
Occupational Interests	1. California Occupational Preference Survey (COPS) 2. Wisconsin Career Information System (WCIS) 3. Career Decision Maker (CDM)
Vocational Aptitudes	1. Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) 2. Career Ability Placement Survey (CAPS) 3. Wisconsin Career Information System (WCIS)
Learning Styles	1. Learning Style Inventory 2. Center for Innovative Teaching Experiences (CITE) 3. Learning Styles and Strategies Inventory (LSSI)

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The Career Occupational Preference Survey (COPS) and the Career Ability Placement Survey (CAPS) are widely used by personnel who work with students with special needs. Both instruments are components of the California Occupational Preference System that measures occupational and vocational aptitudes across 14 professional and skilled career clusters.

Counselors and educators who work with students with special needs believe that these students who exhibit interest and ability in a vocational technical or a school-to-work program are likely to be academically successful. Additionally, assessment of students' interests, abilities, and preferences is crucial to the placement of students with special needs in any secondary or postsecondary education program. Without the correct information, these students may be placed in programs which have little to do with their personal aspirations or employment/career goals.

Survey results show that a large number of school personnel who routinely conducted vocational assessments used the data for the following activities:

- individual education plan (IEP) development,
- placing students into programs, and
- formal transition planning.

However, they reported they did not find the information helpful in making curriculum or instructional modifications.

Alternative assessment approaches needed

The latter finding may be of particular importance for school personnel charged with conducting vocational assessment for students with special needs. It appears that data drawn from traditional interests, aptitudes, and learning styles instruments are considered to be appropriate for IEP goal development, program placement, and transition planning. However, to make appropriate curricular and instructional modifications within vocational technical programs, the researchers suggest the use of alternative assessment approaches such as the MAGIC model. This assessment model incorporates both formal and informal vocational assessment strategies (Lombard et al., 1993). It is designed to provide the information needed to increase access and successful completion of vocational technical programs for students who are members of special populations. The five essential steps of the model include:

Assist students in education planning

1. **Make a prediction.** School personnel encourage students to make tentative predictions regarding future vocational technical education programs of study by using information from the formal assessment. Educators assist students in examining the relationship between their interests and aptitudes to identify realistic program options.

Use curriculum-based vocational assessment

2. **Assess entry level skills and learner outcomes.** After appropriate vocational education courses of study have been predicted, school personnel employ curriculum-based vocational assessment (CBVA) strategies to determine the type of curricular and/or instructional modifications needed. Informal CBVA strategies provide answers to the following curricular questions:

   - What are the essential entry level academic, vocational, and social skills required?
   - What are the instructional preferences of the teachers?
   - What evaluation approaches are employed by the instructor?
   - What instructional and/or curricular modifications are needed?
   - What are the learner outcomes associated with the course of study?

Determine discrepant skills

3. **Guide Student Acquisition of Discrepant Skills.** Once formal and CBVA information have been collected, school personnel conduct a discrepancy analysis to determine which skills are required within a predicted course of study, and which skills the students already possess. The discrepant skills should then be defined as goals on IEP's and as a plan for students to acquire these skills prior to entering the predicted course of study.

Utilize generalization strategies

4. **Instruct Student on Generalization Strategies.** There is evidence that many students with special learning needs have difficulty transferring skills from one environment to another (Ellis, Lenz, & Sabornie, 1987). School personnel assist students in acquiring independent behaviors that promote skill generalization. Generalization strategies that educators can use with students include the following:

   - teacher modeling followed by student simulations,
   - use of verbal rehearsal techniques,
   - use of visual rehearsal techniques,
   - orientation of students to settings where newly acquired skills can transfer, and
   - application of newly acquired skills in multiple school and community settings.

Monitor students' progress

5. **Coordinate Maintenance Checks Following Program Placement.** Following placement into vocational or tech prep courses, school personnel must monitor the student's progress toward exit level competencies. By evaluating student performance, school staff determine if additional curriculum and/or instructional modifications are required.

Five Steps of the MAGIC Model

1. Make a prediction.
2. Assess entry level skills and learner outcomes.
3. Guide student acquisition of discrepant skills.
4. Instruct student on generalization strategies.
5. Coordinate maintenance checks following program placement.

Ensuring equal access to vocational technical courses of study for students who are members of special populations is only one of the issues related to meaningful vocational assessment approaches. Educators need to share the responsibility for implementing curriculum-based assessment methods in order to provide meaningful curriculum and instructional modifications. These modifications can increase the chances for students with special needs to complete their chosen courses of study and subsequently enter the world of work with the skills and motivation needed to be successful.

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New Name . . . New Direction . . . for the Office of Special Populations

In January, 1995, the Office of Special Populations, one of the dissemination and training (D&T) programs of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, will change its name to the Office of Student Services (OSS). The name change reflects the commitment of the office to promoting nationally the full range of quality programs and services that assist all students (secondary and postsecondary) to transition from school to work. The Office of Student Services will also continue to promote access and equity of vocational technical education programs for all students, including those who are members of special populations.

For 1995, the National Center's Office of Student Services will focus on increasing awareness and understanding of programs and services that assist all students to transition from school to work with an emphasis on career guidance and counseling programs. The new D&T program will be housed at the University of Illinois site. The OSS will continue under the leadership of Dr. Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein, director, and Dr. Zipura Burac Matias, associate director.

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The Office of Special Populations of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California, Berkeley is housed at the University of Illinois. The Office of Special Populations works nationally to increase the accessibility, quality, and availability of vocational programs for youth and adults from special populations.

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